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Lincoln, Seward, and US Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era

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Review

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Fry, Joseph A., *Lincoln, Seward, and US Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2019. HARDCOVER. \$40.00 ISBN: 081317712X

The Civil War was both a scourge and a source of change in many aspects of American society. From war to justice, from economics to international relations, the United States underwent a transformation during that era.

Although not close at first, and often at odds, President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William Henry Seward grew together in their relationship while guiding U.S. foreign policy. Lincoln, who had beaten Seward for the Republican Party's 1860 presidential nomination, and Seward, an esteemed member of that party, became not only unlikely allies but formed a friendship.

Fry studiously analyzes the foreign policy decisions Lincoln and Seward made together. They believed in the necessity of keeping the Union together and the need to end the institution of slavery. These ideals formed the guideposts for the Lincoln administration.

Lincoln and Seward sought European support for their position while acknowledging the risks of the Confederate States of America developing independent diplomatic relations with European nations. These insights are not novel, but are important to consider anew.

Fry reviews the relationship between these two politicians in terms of who most influenced the foreign policy of the United States. He recounts the initial exchange between Seward and Lincoln in an April 1, 1861 letter, in which Seward presumptuously assumed he would act as the "power behind the throne." Lincoln, however, immediately disagreed. Chastened by Lincoln, Seward moderated his role.

As a result, the individual strengths of both Lincoln and Seward emerged in concert with one another. Lincoln was a leader of democratic convictions who eloquently spoke of the ideals of an undivided Union. Seward was able to balance his passion - bordering on aggression, with an ability to act conciliatorily in private to advance his causes. The mutual strengths of these two leaders helped to prevent outside powers from becoming involved in the Civil War. Fry shows

that the superpowers of the day, both France and Britain, acknowledged that their national interests were likely best served by working with the Union.

Fry describes in detail the foreign policy dilemmas that Lincoln and Seward faced together. He discusses the pair's objections to granting the Confederacy belligerent status, refusal to cooperate with the blockade, and their hesitance to hinder or prevent the construction of the Confederate Navy, as well as considering the Trent and Peterhoff incidents, and the actions of France in Mexico.

Fry demonstrates exceptional skill in his description of the 1862 Cabinet crisis. He thoroughly describes the ever-present radical Republican antagonism of the administration, which he blames in large part on Senator Charles Sumner.

Seward's service after his friend Lincoln's assassination lasted for an additional four years. During that time, Seward's most acknowledged action as Secretary of State was the purchase of Alaska from Russia. Even after injuries sustained during an assassination attempt and failing health, Seward's diplomatic skills remained sharp. He was able to wrangle the votes necessary for support of the purchase in the Senate, to obtain a resounding decision.

Fry makes clear that his work is not groundbreaking or a consideration of previously unconsidered topics. Nevertheless, his writing is engrossing and a much-welcomed analysis. He demonstrates that the often-overlooked foreign relations of the Lincoln administration, by and through Lincoln and Seward, were crucial in keeping the Union together.

Frank J. Williams is the founding Chair of the Lincoln Forum, President of The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Presidential Library, and regular *Civil War Book Review* columnist for Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.